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tout Her Unwelcome Husband-By W. L. George



CHAPTER IX. (Continued) TE was a man growing elderly, of medium height. Rather sparse brown hair, abundantly streaked with gray, produced the illusion of an elevated brow. Two hard brown eyes, underhung by pockets of dry skin, looked upon her with the unblinking stare of certain reptiles. The fine, disdainful nose; the sunken, compressed, clean-shaven mouth framed by two deep folds; the chin made prominent by the drawn skin that looked harsh-all this contributed to make an effect of intensity and ugly determination.

He considered her for a moment, unsmiling, as if taking dispassionate note of her appearance and surroundings. As without haste he closed the door, she noticed with surprising irrelevancy that he was extraordinarily smart. Excellent evening clothes, nice silk-faced coat and silver-topped ebony stick. That was the one definite idea which whirled in her brain, like a cork in the middle of swirling water. Now he put down his things, sat down in an armchair; he was looking at her with an air of irony-looking at her as if he analyzed and evaluated her. This perfect self-possession, instead of disturbing her more, forced her into activity. In a whisper that was suddenly hoarse she said:

"Geoff!" "Yes," said the man.

"You!" said Mrs. Caldecot, distractedly pushing back her hair. "Yes, I, Geoffrey Caldecot. What about it, Claire?

"But what?" said Mrs. Caldecot. 'After all these years?'

"After all these years, Clarrie, as ou say. It does me good to see the old place again, to say nothing of the old girl. Well, now, say you're pleased, instead of looking as surprised as a cod that's been a week on the fishmonger's slab."

"Well," said Mrs. Caldecot, who found her self-possession returning, 'I'm rather surprised."

"Why, my dear Clarrie," said Caldecot, as he leaned forward, playing with his monocle cord until the glass fell out of his eye. "Oh, curse this thing. It's always falling out. Well, I've worn it for thirty years. What were we talking about? Oh, yes, you were surprised. I'm sure I don't know why. Regrettable misunderstandings caused the course of true love to run awry. Might happen to anybody. Happens to lots of people, doesn't it? Still, I don't see why you should get such a shock because your loving husband re-

turns from abroad." "What do you want?" said Mrs. Caldecot as her faculties returned and she made ready for some sort of struggle.

"What do I want, my dear? Oh, how can you ask? How can you turn such a bitter face to Darby after long years returning to his Joan, and only waiting for the fatted calf. I'm afraid that's mixed mythology, Clarrie, but you won't mind, will you? I've come back out of natural affection, of course."

"What do you want?" "You've become very blunt, my dear. I want to have a chat with you. I've had the devil of a long wait, too. Seems to me you dawdle over your dinner longer than in the old days, eh? Well, as middle age creeps upon us I suppose we get greedy. Been waiting for you for an hour. Nearly burst in ten minutes ago, but you were telephoning and I thought I'd better keep out.

Tact, my dear, you know, tact." Then, as if her husband was deliberately trying to provoke her into an unguarded interruption, he went on chatting of the inefficiency

of the telephone service. She did not listen, but as he spoke she could not help registering the degradation of the handsome features. As she observed the dry, wrinkled skin, the air of premature decay, she couldn't help a half-unconscious spasm of pity; the cashing, the handsome Geoffrey, to have turned into this disreputably smart, dangerous-looking creature! It was

As he grew conscious of her gaze he became arch. "Well, my dear, I haven't come back to talk to you about the telephone, especially as your ruby lips are not contributing to the debate. There isn't much welcome in this house for a stray lamb, is there? Well, well, I don't want to be hard on you. Would you like to stand me a drink?"

"How did you get in?" asked Mrs. Caldecot, suddenly preoccupied with this trifle.

"Oh, Clarrie, how little you know me! How you misunderstand me! You always have, and as they used to say at the Lyceum, unless it was somewhere else, you cannot shake my latchkey."

off your share of guilt. I got in with 'Your latchkey?' Why, of course. All these years, my dear Clarrie, I've kept my latchkey. Just a little latchkey to remind me of you. Ah! I always

was a sentimental cuss. It has never left me. Before the rolling ball at Monte Carlo I've fondled it so that it might bring me luck. It didn't. In more emotional moods, in America, I've sat before my lonely radiator, holding in my hand this token of the past and dreaming of days gone by. Just a little latchkey, Clarrie. I shall write a poem

about it one day.' "What do you want?" asked Mrs. Caldecot in a suddenly high voice. He was maddening her. She felt that this drivel had a significancethat he used it only as a sort of prelude, that he was playing with her as a cat with a mouse, that he was enjoying himself like a vicious schoolbey that has played a trick. "What do you want?" she said again. "Good heavens! Don't I know you! Don't I? For heaven's

sake, don't make me rude.' "There's no reason why you should be rude, my dear. All I want is to have a few words with my wife. Well, now, aren't you pleased? Weren't you very sorry when I was unavoidably detained abroad thirteen years ago? I was unavoidably detained. She wouldn't let me go. But you always inhabited my dreams, and so I felt I wanted one of our dear old chats."

'Look here, Geoffrey, you're being "That's better," said Caldecot, laughing for the first time. "It isn't any better. Only you're

being silly on purpose to annoy me, to hide something else. Don't I know you?"

"If you did, then you would realize that I have an affectionate nature. Your only complaint could be that this nature was too generous. All that I have come to say is just this: I am very fond of you."

"Do you know," said Mrs. Calde-cot, after a pause, "I can almost believe you have the-the impertinence to mean it. You might very well be conceited enough to think that I'd have affection for you after three years of hell with you-three years during which I had to see you drunk, drunk in my presence, drunk before my friends. Oh, if it was only that, I suppose I'd have stuck it out, but you think I'm going tooh, it's ridiculous. You made me a joke among my friends; you, who could never let a woman alone if she was under eighty. Don't you think I know you? Don't you think

I don't know that the servants weren't safe from you? Even on our honeymoon. Don't make me talk of these things. It's been hell. And hell again for all those years, when I was a woman who'd been deserted, not wanted, a failure, an object for pity, scrapped by a drunkard and philanderer."

"Clarrie," said Caldecot, as he slowly lit a cigarette, "you've increased your vocabulary since my day. Well, I'll be fair and square with you. I'm quite willing to overlook the past. At least, it's in your hands to make me pleasant. I don't want to make a fuss; dear me, no. Only you're rather rude, rather hysterical, I suppose. Natural enough under the stress of reunion, and I won't say another word about it."

As he paused she realized that she was right, that something deliberate emanated from his speech. 'Oh," she said, "I see. This interview so far is not very agreeable, Geoffrey.

'Don't call me Geoffrey," said Caldecot, protesting. "It sounds so cold. Call me Geoff and let everything be rapture and roses.

'What do you want?" cried Mrs. Caldecot again, and this time stamped upon the floor.

"All right," said Caldecot, "I'il tell you. It's a little difficult to explain. The natural delicacy which is so strong in me holds me back, but the fact is that while the years rolled by, even though I was abroad, I never forgot you, Clarrie, and I kept upon you an eye-oh, in the cause of confugal tenderness, of course-but still-an eye.'

"An eye!" repeated Mrs. Caldecot. As she spoke her first bewilderment passed away and her heart began to beat faster. She was frightfully afraid, and she did not know of what, but just of the idea that this man, who had made such ruin of her life, had not left her when he deserted her; that still he had hung about her life—an evil spirit.

'Why, yes, of course, my dear," replied Caldecot, blandly. "Did you really think that because pressing circumstances called me abroad I should lose all interest in one so near and so dear? Why, I remember on our honeymoon in Veniceoh, but what's the use of talking of that! Well, well, time goes on. Ah,

"Geoffrey," said Mrs. Caldecot in a surprisingly even voice, which showed that already she had collected her strength, preparing to fight, "say what you mean."

"Anything to please you. As I was saying, I always liked to know what you were doing. I was so sorry to think that you might be lonely-though I had an idea that wouldn't last long."

'How dare you!' "I dare because I know. Now, now, don't blush, even if you have been naughty. And don't look so tragic and clench your fists at me. Bless me, I don't blame you. Indeed, I was quite interested when a little bird told me that you were lunching and dining out, and the little bird even twittered something about week-ending out, and always in the same company.'

"I suppose you thought," said Mrs. Caldecot, choosing aggression as her method of defense, "that after you'd gone I was going to avoid the society of my friends, that I'd sit and mourn you.

'No, I didn't think you'd do that At least, no longer than was decent. I gather you mourned me for five years, old dear, and, really, I think it awfully sweet of you. So I wasn't surprised when I was told that you and Mr. Rodbourne, M. P. for East Farnshire'

"Please leave him out." 'C) 1922, by American Weekly, Inc. Great Britain Rights Reserved.

"Afraid you didn't give me the example. Can't be done. Can't leave Bobbie out. It's too late for both of us."

Mrs. Caldecot looked away. What was horrible in this was not so much the covert threat, the presence so near her of the intolerable; the horror was that Caldecot should be able to lay upon a memory so lovely and so dear hands that defiled it. She dared say nothing. Any reply might strengthen him by admission.

Fortunately he needed no reply "But if you think I'm going to re-+ proach you, set your mind at rest, my dear. Did I ever refuse you anything if I had it? Or if I could get it out of anybody else who had it? Never. I don't want to disturb you. It would be a terrible thing for me to disturb two lovers, especially if they made it worth my while to let them alone."

He paused. "You don't seem to understand, Clarrie. I don't want to do you any harm. I don't mind Bobbie. Charming fellow, I expect. I've the warmest feeling for him, he being a member of the same dynasty, in a manner of speaking. Only I'm rather hard up, and since you seem in a mood to want plain

the Q. T." It was his brutal tone that drove

replied. "It's true you always dared

(Continued on Page 20)



speaking, all I've got to say is, if you'll let me have a couple of thousand I'll go off and spend it. Then we'll say no more about it; you'll have no more trouble and you can indulge in your grand passion on

Mrs. Caldecot to denials. She would have given way before a simple assertion, but he enraged her.

"How dare you insult me!" she



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